

1 Jan 2023

Circumcision of Christ & Basil the Great

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1] The school pupils here might have in their pencil case a mathematical instrument called a protractor: a semi-circle of clear plastic marked with one hundred-and-eighty degrees. It is used, of course, as, no doubt, older members of the congregation will remember, for measuring angles. The full circle, therefore, is measured by three hundred-and-sixty degrees.

2] The number 360 for the full circle is not random: it was chosen to reflect the number of days in the year, with a few days to spare, of course; the time it takes for the Earth to orbit the Sun, and so the circle of the year is completed. We have, in fact, the ancient Babylonian civilisation to thank for that calculation. We also have from them the seven-day week: a way of dividing time that was evidently embraced by God's old people, the children of Israel. Indeed, it was religious requirements, whether in Israel, or among the pagan peoples of the ancient Middle East, that made it necessary to measure time at all, in order that times and seasons and festivals might be observed, even if just to plan the planting and harvesting of crops and to beg the blessing of the gods upon them.

3] In Jewish reckoning, the seventh number is blessed, as is the seventh day, Saturday, the last day of the week. Beginning at sunset on Friday evening and ending at Sunset on Saturday evening, the Sabbath, Shabbat, still finds the echo of its name in certain European languages: Samedi, il Sabato, Savvato, Sabado, Sambata. In English the days of the week are named after pagan Anglo-Saxon gods, except for Saturday strangely, coming from the Latin, dies Saturni, after the Roman god, Saturn.

4] But what of the eighth day? It returns, once more, to the first day of the Week to repeat the cycle. Thus rolling through time, the eighth becomes the symbol of eternity, the completion of all things and their perfection. So it was that, in accordance with the Law of Moses, God in the flesh Himself, submits both to the law of Time, as well as to the holy commandments. On the eighth day, Christ

sheds His first blood in circumcision, obedient to the Law He Himself had given to Abraham. We regard as hypocrites those who make laws but do not keep them themselves: not so Our Lord. From this day onward, until He keeps the perfect and great Sabbath, resting in the tomb during His Passover through Death, Our Lord will complete and bring the elder Law to its completion and perfection of purpose. Then, by His resurrection, all things are made new.

5] It is for this reason, by virtue of Christ's rising from the dead, that the first day of the week and, indeed, the eighth day, has overtaken the Sabbath and becomes for us an image and foretaste of that eternal life to which we are called. The Sabbath at the end of the week still remains a day of rest, which is why any fasting rules in the Orthodox Church are relaxed on that day. But the Sunday, the first and eighth, is for us the start of the New Creation. We have from the apostles this day of our common work and worship, our labour in the Lord which is the Divine Liturgy. It is no wonder that certain European languages name the Sunday as the Lord's Day: Dimanche, Domenica, Kyriaki, Domingo, Duminica.

6] Christ, was circumcised on the eighth day in accordance with the Old Law, as we heard in today's gospel. So it is that in Orthodox Tradition, parents name their new-born infants on the eighth day with a rite of blessing from their priest. From birth to death, though living in this world, in this time, Orthodox people share already, through participation in the Holy Mysteries of the Church, in that new age, the eighth day that is to come. As St Paul tells us this morning, writing to the epistle to the Hebrews, 'In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God.' He tells us that we have done with the elemental spirits of this age; with the philosophies of this age; with the human traditions of this age.

7] So whilst we await the redemption of our bodies, we must come to understand ourselves as belonging only very loosely to the world. In anything that claims our loyalty, our engagement, our

submission, we are in danger of falling into sin; that is, separation from that life in Christ, that life of the age to come that, even now, can be ours.

8] Today, the first of January, we also commemorate the great St Basil of Caesarea in Cappadocia, whose Divine Liturgy we offer once again today. Basil, who died at the age of forty-eight, had already by then reached such sanctity, such closeness to Christ, so as to make us who are older, blush with shame when we regard our own failures, our constant fallings into sin, our own vain attempts at asceticism and charity, despite our years.

9] But even St Basil, listing among his own family relations several canonised saints of the Orthodox Church, still had his own struggles, changing his way of life from that of his early youth. He writes, 'I had wasted much time on follies and spent nearly all of my youth in vain labours, and devotion to the teachings of a wisdom that God had made foolish. Suddenly, I awoke as out of a deep sleep. I beheld the wonderful light of the Gospel truth, and I recognised the nothingness of the wisdom of the princes of this world.'

10] Despite his later ill health and many ecclesiastic troubles in which he was beset in his day, St Basil's life teaches us that our spirituality cannot be merely inward and concerned with ourselves alone; that the inner life in Christ, is to overflow with great charity towards those we can help. Our own belonging here, to this community, is not merely for our own individual salvation, but is for all, for our salvation in the body of Christ is in common. Whether we are bearing one another's burdens, or bearing with one another; whether we are helping those of the household of God, or those outside, let it be a witness to our Life in Christ, Let us keep in mind these words of St Basil the Great, 'The bread you store belongs to the hungry. The clothes you accumulate belong to the naked... The money you bury deep into the ground to keep it safe, belongs to the poor. You were unfair to as many people as you could have helped and you did not.'

